JAMES K. SENIOR

Narrative written about 1960.

NARRATIVE:

October 5, 1957.

It may be of interest for me to recount the only incident during my term of military service which got me into serious trouble.

Shortly after the Armistice was signed, it was decided to send a small group of C.W.S. officers into Germany to inspect such German gas plants as might be found in the region held by the Army of Occupation. The three officers picked for this purpose were

(1) Major Frederick Pope, the man under whom I had served on my trip to the United States, and with whom I had already had so much difficulty. Pope was a wretched chemist, a mediocre engineer, and a thoroughly unscrupulous rascal. His one idea was to win enough military promotion to establish for himself a reputation. This reputation he hoped to use, after his retirement from the army, as the foundation for a career as an engineering consultant,

(2) Major Frederick G. Keyes, the commandant of the Puteaux laboratory. Keyes was at the time my commanding officer. I had the highest respect for his abilities both as a chemist and as a military commander. Moreover, he had on several occasions been very kind to me. I was as devoted to him as any first lieutenant ought to be to his commanding major.

(3) Myself. I have always liked to think that this unusual opportunity to take part in a very interesting tour of inspection was offered me because of my strenuous (and not entirely ineffective) efforts in connection with the production of mustard gas.

As may well be imagined, this choice of personnel for the contemplated mission was by no means agreeable to Pope. He knew well enough that Keyes was immeasurably his superior as a chemist. And he was further aware that Keyes (a man of rather peppery temper) would never consent to act as his cat's paw, and thus to help him get the lieutenant-coloneley which was (for the moment) the goal of his ambitions. He also felt sure that, if any difference arose between himself and Keyes, I would be more than likely to side with Keyes. In this premonition he was entirely correct.

Pope therefore determined to get rid of me. He figured that, once I was out of the way and some sycophant of his own choosing appointed in my place, he would be able to manage Keyes, firstly because his commission as Major antedated that of Keyes by a few weeks (thus making him Keyes's military superior), and secondly because he never had the slightest compunction about swearing his way through a stone wall.

I was in those days an innocent-minded lad, with no wish whatever to get mixed up in the feuds between my military superiors. Unfortunately I unwittingly gave Pope just the opening he needed. There was at Roussillon a French chemist named Evieux who had been particularly helpful to me during my tour of duty at the plant of the Usines du Rhone. I had consequently got to be quite friendly with Evieux and was anxious to show him such courtesies as I could. I had brought back with me from the States several small items of equipment then unobtainable in France, which I judged might be useful to him in his work. A few days after I returned to Paris, and about ten days after the signing of the armistice, I sent him these little gifts. At the same time I wrote him the letter here marked as Letter A. This I dictated in English to Miss Van Boeckel, the secretary at the Puteaux laboratory. She translated it into French, and I signed it and sent it off to Evieux, who knew very little English. I think it will be agreed that a more innocent communication would be hard to imagine.

Pope, Keyes and I arrived at Chaumont on December 11, 1918. The red tape which up to then had hampered our attempts to get started had been largely cut away, and there was every prospect that all would go well. No doubt it would have, if only I had kept quiet. But I didn't. On December 12th, I happened to be with Pope, and, by way of making conversation, I told him of my letter to Evieux, whom he had known slightly at Roussillon. Pope saw his opportunity at once. He pretended to hit the ceiling. In my letter, I had grossly exceeded my authority. In fact, what I had written came pretty close to treason. Since I had no copy of my letter with me (it was on file at Puteaux), I must come at once to the office of Col. Johnson (the acting head of the C.W.S.) and there dictate a letter duplicating, as closely as I could remember, my one to Evieux. This letter he (Pope) would show to Johnson, and the two of them would decide just what punishment should be meted out to me.

I was completely flabbergasted. Only some time afterwards did it dawn on me what was going on. For the moment I was so nonplussed that I consented to do whatever Pope demanded. I went with him to Col. Johnson's office and wrote out the letter here marked as Letter B. Pope had this letter typed, and, with the typewritten copy in his hand, he vanished into Johnson's private office. I was told to wait outside until I was called.

What transpired in that private office I don't know and never will know. After a few moments, an orderly was dispatched for Major Keyes. He came in shortly; and when I told him what the trouble was, he appeared as astonished as I. He too vanished into the private office, and a few moments later word was sent to me that I need no longer wait. So I went back to the quarters at the hotel, which I was then sharing with Major Keyes. There I lay down on the bed wondering whether I was to be shot at sunrise or merely given a dishonorable discharge and sent home in disgrace.

A couple of hours later, Keyes came in, very white about the gills, and with a very stern look. "Well", he said, "I've stuck my neck out for you and no formal action will be taken. But of course all thought of your going to Germany is now at an end. Col. Johnson says you are not to be trusted. Right now, he and Major Pope are looking for some officer to take your place. Get your things together and go back to Paris tomorrow."

And then he took occasion, for almost a full hour, to read me the riot act--not entirely without reason. "This talk about exceeding your authority and betraying your country is of course all horse-feathers." he said. "But you have one fault which is almost as bad as treason. You talk too much. If you had kept your big mouth shut, Major Pope would never have known anything about your letter to Evieux. Now you've got yourself thoroughly in Dutch. If it had not been for my strenuous opposition, Heaven only knows what kind of a ride those two bastards would have taken you on. I'm thoroughly disgusted with you."

So back to Paris I went next day in a very chastened spirit. A traitor I certainly was not. But on the main point Keyes was right. I had surely talked too much.

Once back in Paris, I told my story to my tried friend, Captain Nicolet, then acting commandant of the Puteaux laboratory. From him I secured permission to make a copy of my letter to Evieux, which we found exactly in its place in the office files. I wanted it to use as self-protection in case any further trouble should develop out of the Chaumont incident. "It's a serious offence", said Nicolet, "to let anyone make a copy of a letter in our files. But for your sake I'm going to take a chance. I'm pretty sure you've had your lesson. You won't talk." He was right. For nearly forty years I have kept mum.

Left to my own rather gloomy thoughts, I soon began to see the light. Not only had I been very neatly "framed", but my unfortunate slip had been used by Pope and Johnson to wreak a long-cherished grudge against Keyes. Him they hated heartily, partly because he was an excellent chemist and an officer of independent spirit, but chiefly because he had never taken any pains to conceal his contempt for both of them.

About ten days later, Major Keyes returned to the laboratory at Puteaux. He told me that, in the course of his trip, he had come almost to blows with Pope. In return, Pope, after their arrival in Chaumont, had tried to get him court-martialed for insubordination. Johnson, however, thought ~~thought~~ this would be going too far. But Captain Nicolet had judged correctly. I had learned my lesson. The entry for Dec. 23rd in my diary reads "Major Keyes is back.----Pope as obliging and pleasant as usual."

Some two or three years after my discharge from the army, I was told that Major Pope had recently died in an insane asylum. But I never took the trouble to check the truth of this in itself not improbable story.

Letter A.

Paris, November 20 (approx),1918.

My dear Mr. Evieux

I received your letter which was sent to me from France and reached me in New York. I suppose by this time you have nearly forgotten how to make yperite, and I hope you will never have to do it over again. But perhaps you will be interested to know what we did in America. I have just returned from the United States, and, at the time I left, we were making about 30 tons a day, and were preparing to make about 200 tons a day within five or six weeks. We did not adopt the process of the Usines du Rhone, but took over an English process which was first developed in the plant of Levinstein Ltd. at Manchester. This is a very simple process and requires very little machinery; it consists of bubbling ethylene through a big iron pot filled with sulphur monochloride kept at a temperature below 35°. The yperite which is formed is about 70% pure and has an acidity of 0.2%. I am sorry that I did not bring back with me any of the samples of Yperite turned out at Edgewood, because I am sure you would have been interested to see them. The substance is a clear liquid about the color of honey, does not fume at all, and shows very little tendency to decompose in the shell. I hope we shall never have to make any more mustard gas, but if we do, you may rely on the United States making a great deal of very fine material.

In spite of the fact that we did not take over the process of the Usines du Rhone, I do not think that the time I spent at Roussillon was all wasted. We have found many of the analytical methods which I learned there very useful, and have benefited greatly by your experience. I want to thank you again for taking such pains to teach me while I was with you. No one seems to know exactly what the American chemists will have to do now that the hostilities are ended. As for myself I am not in the least anxious to get back to the States and I hope to be able to find some work to do helping in the reconstruction which must be undertaken in France and Belgium. I do not expect that I will be able to get back to Roussillon again, but I hope that, if any of my friends down there should happen to come to Paris, they will not neglect to come and see me at our laboratory 125 Avenue de St. Germain, Puteaux.

Please remember me to all the boys at Maison Viallon, and tell them I will never forget the happy weeks that I spent down there. Do you remember the celebration we had when the last German was driven back at the Marne. I wish you would come to Paris because I should like to celebrate the victory with you, the way it ought to be done.

With best regards to you, I am

Letter B.

As nearly as I can remember, the personal letter which I wrote on or about Nov. 20th to M. Ernest Evieux, assistant chemist in the employ of the Usines du Rhone, ran about as follows:

My dear M. Evieux,

You may be interested to know that I have returned from my trip to America and that we have been successful in setting up a very efficient plant for the manufacture of Yperite. We did not adopt the process used by the Usines du Rhone but took instead an English process which seemed to us more simple. It consists essentially in bubbling ethylene through S_2Cl_2 contained in an iron tank, stirring thoroughly during the operation.

Nevertheless I do not consider that the time I spent at Roussillon was wasted, as I learned many interesting things in regard to analytical methods etc. which proved of help to us in the United States. And I shall always look back with pleasure to the pleasant days I spent at Maison Viallon.

With best regards, I am,

Sincerely yours,

James K. Senior

1st Lt. C.W.S.

This letter was translated into French by the stenographer in the laboratory at Puteaux, signed and sent.

James K. Senior
1st Lt. C.W.S.